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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 000562

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TAGS: KS KN PGOV PREL

SUBJECT: GRANTING OVERSEAS KOREANS VOTING RIGHTS RAISES  
RISK OF CORRUPTION, IN-FIGHTING

REF: SEOUL 000498

Classified By: POL Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: On February 5, the National Assembly passed legislation granting voting rights to Koreans residing overseas. Starting with the 2012 National Assembly elections, overseas Koreans will be able to vote in person at Korean Embassies and Consulates. How to enfranchise these voters has been the source of some debate, and National Assembly contacts on both sides of the aisle worry about the impact of giving overseas communities more power. Political contacts foresee problems with the first election or two, which will likely be followed by increased eligibility restrictions. Ironically, this victory for Korean democracy may also exacerbate and export the worst trait of Korean politics -- corruption. END SUMMARY.

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Right to Vote: The Legislation  
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¶12. (SBU) On February 5, the National Assembly passed legislation allowing Koreans who reside overseas the right to vote in future presidential and National Assembly elections. The 2012 elections will be the first time that Koreans residing overseas will be able to vote since 1972 when President Park Chung-hee denied this right to Koreans residing abroad. The Constitutional Court ruled the restriction unconstitutional in June 2007 and ordered the law's revision. Overseas Koreans will still be unable to participate in local elections and their votes will only count towards proportional seats in the National Assembly (54 seats out of a total 299 are determined based on party support). Press reports indicate that overseas Koreans welcome suffrage and see it as a significant development in Korean democracy. To cast ballots, Koreans will have to go to ROK embassies and consulates and register to vote 150-60 days before the election; mail-in voting will not be allowed due to security concerns. Suffrage for overseas Koreans could have a significant impact on the 2012 elections because the 2.7 million overseas Koreans eligible to vote are largely conservative.

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Eligibility  
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¶13. (SBU) Korean nationals over the age of 19 have the right

to vote, and the same will hold true for the overseas community. Korea does not recognize dual citizenship; men must choose a single nationality by March 31 of the year they turn 18, and women by the age of 21. When Korean nationals register at their nearest Embassies or Consulates, voters will have to show their Korean passport and their foreign country visa or long-term residency certification. This process will prevent U.S. citizens who may still retain valid Korean passports from voting in Korean elections.

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Potential Problems: Power and Money  
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¶4. (C) Political resistance to allowing overseas Koreans the right to vote came primarily from the opposition Democratic Party, but even ruling Grand National Party (GNP) lawmakers cite reason for caution. According to National Assembly Representative Hong Jung-wook, who recently discussed this issue during a trip to the U.S., there are three primary reasons for concern. The first is fairness. Koreans will have to vote in person in Korean Embassies or Consulates, significantly reducing participation. Hong estimated that only about 500,000 out of about 2.7 million overseas Koreans will vote. Hong said that Koreans were suspicious that allowing mail-in or electronic voting would provide opportunity for vote rigging.

¶5. (C) The second major concern that Hong mentioned was the potential to divide Korean communities abroad. Hong said Korean communities in Los Angeles and New York were already sharply divided and characterized by political groups vying

for power within the community -- in the New York region there are more than 1,000 Korean associations. Hong was unsure how the GNP would decide which overseas Korean groups the party would affiliate itself with. Hong said there is a prevalence of "good ol' boys," who want to be in charge of political organizations for the status and because it affords them an opportunity to travel to Korea and meet with the President. These community leaders are particularly strong in the U.S., Japan, and Australia, Hong said. Already the GNP has been flooded with demands from these overseas Korean leaders, and many of them are arguing that the overseas communities should have their own representatives -- an idea Hong dismissed as impossible.

¶6. (C) The third concern Hong cited was the potential that the overseas Koreans would have a disproportionately big voice in domestic politics. The number of eligible overseas votes is approximately six times more than the margin of voters that determined the winner of the 1997 presidential election and four times more than the number that determined the winning candidate in the 2002 election. Most overseas Koreans do not pay taxes, but there is some concern that their ability to sway elections might lead them to look to Korea for benefits for which their countries of residence should be responsible.

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Rolling Out the Vote  
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¶7. (C) The first election for which this law will apply will not occur until 2012, buying the National Assembly some time to work out the kinks. One National Assembly staffer told poloff that a task force would probably be set up soon to implement the daunting job of starting an overseas voting system. Still, she speculated that in 2012, overseas voting would probably only be available in the U.S. and Japan. Hong predicted that the first couple of elections would highlight unforeseen issues, resulting in eligibility restrictions like time limits -- for example, voters who had lived overseas for more than seven years would not be allowed to vote -- and enforcing prohibitions against dual citizenship. Hong said he thought giving overseas Koreans the chance to vote was a mistake, but, because denying the right was found to be unconstitutional, there was little choice.

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Comment

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¶8. (C) On the face of it, enabling overseas Koreans to vote is a victory for democracy, but contacts worry that the effort will export the worst traits of Korean politics -- corruption, infighting, and fraud. Already in the Taekwang Industrial scandal still unfolding in the National Assembly, lawmakers are being questioned about inappropriate contributions from a Korean businessman in New York (reftel), and other political contacts have confessed the common practice of accepting money from Koreans living abroad. There is also some concern among overseas Koreans that legitimizing their political participation will make it harder to integrate the Korean community into their countries of residence. Koreans in Japan have found it especially difficult to join mainstream Japan. Similarly, some Koreans in the U.S. believe that they should actively integrated into American society rather than seeking additional ties to the old country. Korean legislators acknowledge these concerns, but note that they are all trapped by the Constitutional requirement that all South Koreans -- in or out of the country -- have the right to vote.

STEPHENS